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Rachel: The Feminist

LAST UPDATED ON: AUGUST 30, 2023 AT 2:25 AM BY REBECCA WALLACE KEENE (HTTPS://WWW.PATHEOS.COM/BLOGS/RECLAIMINGTHETRUTH/AUTHOR/RKEENE/)

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Rachel

Rachel was married to Jacob, but so was her sister. Her life was tainted by her inability to have children and a deceitful family. Yet, Rachel was deeply loved by both her husband and G-d. That love gave her the power to be a woman in charge of her own destiny and fight for the rights of women in a patriarchal society.

Rebecca Wrestled with Rachel

Before telling Rachel's story, I must make a confession. Jacob wrestled with G-d for a night, but Rebecca wrestled with Rachel for three weeks. I have done everything to avoid writing this because I have a real aversion to this story. Everyone in it lies, manipulates, and tricks everyone else. Such is humanity, I suppose. Painting any of them, in the Holy Light Rachel is normally painted in, proves to be a difficult task for me. Yet, I cannot do a Women in The Bible series and leave out a beloved matriarch. So, Rachel and I had our struggle. I suppose at the end of this article you can judge for yourself who won.

Surprise! It is not Rachel!

Rachel's story begins when she meets Jacob by the well. Jacob stays with her family for a month. Finally, her father asks Jacob what his wages should be for his work. Jacob then proposes that he should work for Laban for seven years, for the right to marry Rachel. The story records that Jacob is deeply in love with Rachel. Laban agrees and Jacob completes the seven years. Finally, the date arrives when Rachel should marry Jacob, but the day after the wedding night Jacob discovers it was Leah,Rachel's sister, he had married. Genesis records in **verses 29:23-26: (https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+29%3A23-26&version=NIV)**

"[23] But when evening came, he took his daughter Leah and brought her to Jacob, and Jacob made love to her. [24] And Laban gave his servant Zilpah to his daughter as her attendant.[25] When morning came, there was Leah! So Jacob said to Laban, "What is this you have done to me? I served you for Rachel, didn't I? Why have you deceived me?"[26] Laban replied, "It is not our custom here to give the younger daughter in marriage before the older one."

A Selfless Act?

From a straight reading of The Torah text, it appears that Laban has gone through with this deceit on his own. However, The Rabbis in the midrash state that Rachel was in on the deception. They say she gave Leah signs that would make Jacob believe Leah was Rachel. This is meant to make her appear humble and selfless, ensuring her sister with **"weak eyes" (https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis%2029:17&version=NIV)** was married before her. The Rabbis believe Rachel prolonged the day of her happiness to not disgrace Leah.

A Manipulator?

However, this also means she begins her marriage by lying and manipulating her husband. The Midrash says she was **"a good secret keeper." (https://jwa.org/encyclopedia/article/rachel-midrash-and-aggadah?fbclid=IwAR2q_ZgjOx-104mKaXyCEia5F3qR-KByKrAm3gkD8Z6dLWQ1VI2xIiMMcgw)** That is a very kind way of saying liar. While I do appreciate the care they took to highlight a woman's strengths rather than her flaws, I can't help but think that she lied and manipulated her husband in their version of the story.

Still, in this version, she ensures her sister has a husband and is not disgraced. As we see later in the tale, this was a decision that would cause Rachel much personal anguish in the future. So, while she may have manipulated a new husband, she acted loyal to her sister, whom she had known much longer. Perhaps this can be seen as an act of true feminist power and sisterhood. Rather than go along with the wants of a man, she stood up for her fellow woman at great personal cost. That is a Rachel I can like.

However, I am more inclined to believe Laban acted alone, as a straight Torah reading suggests. Of course, this version makes Rachel a bit of a victim, but she gets revenge on her father later. While I have conflicting beliefs about Rachel, one thing I am certain of is that Rachel was no victim.

Rachel Experiences Envy

Whether Rachel helped her sister or was tricked by her father, once she learns she cannot conceive, as Leah does, she becomes jealous of her sister. The text records quite clearly that both women knew Jacob's love was for Rachel and Leah felt unloved. Yet, Rachel is still quite envious of Leah. This part of the story allows us to see the forcefulness and passion which Rachel held. She yelled at her husband, **"Give me children, or I'll die!" (https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+30%3A1&version=NIV)**. To this Jacob basically replies, Am I G-d?

Finally, Rachel does have a child of her own after using some of her sister's mandrakes. The price she paid for those madrakes was allowing Leah to sleep with Jacob that night. I must confess that as a feminist I rather like seeing the woman selling the man for once. Go, Rachel! Yet, this is more proof of the master manipulator that Rachel was. She knew her sister was desperate for her husband's love and would give her anything to be with him. She also knew her husband would have preferred to lie with her. Yet, she made a business deal that would result in her husband lying with her sister against his will and failing still to give Leah the love she desperately longed for. Still, G-d blesses Rachel and this manipulation. She is no longer barren. Who am I to judge what G-d has blessed? No one.

Sisterhood and Feminist Action!!

Years later Jacob decides to leave Laban's land with his wives. Rachel and Leah said, "[14] "Do we still have any share in the inheritance of our father's estate? [15] Does he not regard us as foreigners? Not only has he sold us, but he has used up what was paid for us. [16] Surely all the wealth that God took away from our father belongs to us and our children. So do whatever God has told you." This was radical thinking for women of the time. Normally only men inherit. Yet, here we see these two strong women lamenting that their father has spent their inheritance. Also, they seem to be angry that they were given to Jacob as wages. This is maybe the strongest feminist thinking we see in The Torah.

They didn't just think it either. They took action. Without Jacob's knowledge, Rachel stole her father's household gods. Again, I am not a fan of seeing one of our matriarchs as a thief. Yet, Laban had by this time tricked Jacob into marrying both sisters, changed his wages ten times, and sold his daughters for 14 years of labor. There is a certain justice being carried out in Rachel's actions. She is reclaiming some of what has been stolen from her. When Laban comes looking for the gods and accusing Jacob of the theft Rachel sits on them and says she cannot get up, because she is on her period. She very cleverly used the man's own patriarchy against him. As I said, whatever Rachel was, she was no victim. Here we see she indeed could be called a thief, a liar, and a manipulator.

Sometimes The Ends Justify the Means. Let Justice Roll Down Like Water.

Yet, Rachel's manipulations and misdeeds had a purpose and righted wrongs. She manipulated a man's world so that the women could win. Rachel ensured her weak-eyed sister had a husband and children. She made her father pay for his deceptions, and she ensured an inheritance for herself and her sister. Like **Rebekah (https://www.patheos.com/blogs/reclaimingthetruth/2023/08/rebekah-in-charge-of-her-own-destiny/)** before her, she was a woman in charge of her own destiny. When I remember Rachel, I will remember that women should stand up for one another. I will remember that women deserve a place in the world at all costs. When I think of Rachel, I will remember that even in the most patriarchal societies women have power. We can make the story happen as it should. We just have to be "good secret keepers." Ladies, shh!!!